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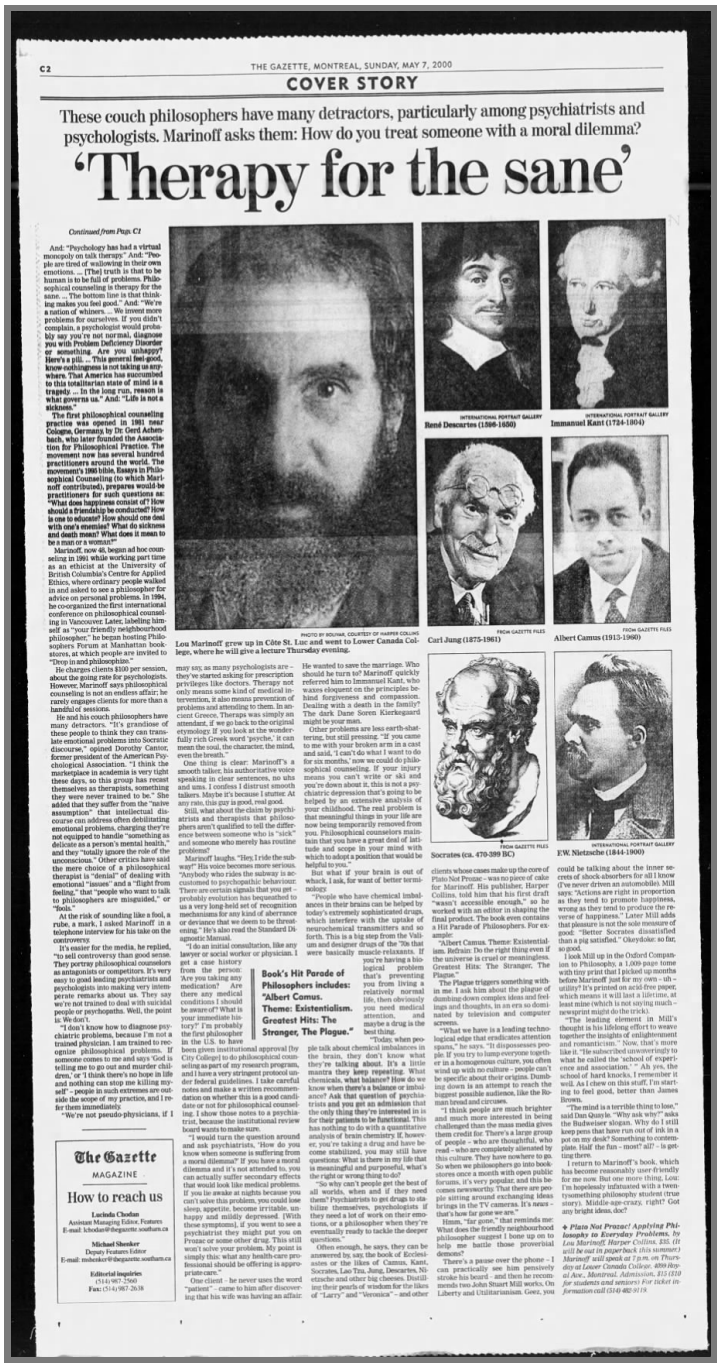

C2 THE GAZETTE, MONTREAL, SUNDAY, MAY 7, 2000

COVER STORY

These couch philosophers have many detractors, particularly among psychiatrists and psychologists. Marinoff asks them: How do you treat someone with a moral dilemma?

'Therapy for the sane'

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And: "Psychology has had a virtual monopoly on talk therapy." And: "People are tired of wallowing in their own emotions. ... [The] truth is that to be human is to be full of problems. Philosophical counselling is therapy for the sane. ... The bottom line is that thinking makes you feel good." And: "We're a nation of whiners. ... We invent more problems for ourselves. If you didn't complain, a psychologist would probably say you're not normal, diagnose you with Problem Deficiency Disorder or something. Are you unhappy? Here's a pill. ... This general feel-good, know-nothingness is not taking us anywhere. That America has succumbed to this totalitarian state of mind is a tragedy. ... In the long run, reason is what governs us." And: "Life is not a sickness."

The first philosophical counseling practice was opened in 1981 near Cologne, Germany, by Dr. Gerd Achenbach, who later founded the Association for Philosophical Practice. The movement now has several hundred practitioners around the world. The movement's 1995 bible, Essays in Philosophical Counseling (to which Marinoff contributed), prepares would-be practitioners for such questions as: "What does happiness consist of? How should a friendship be conducted? How is one to educate? How should one deal with one's enemies? What do sickness and death mean? What does it mean to be a man or a woman?"

Marinoff, now 46, began ad hoc counseling in 1981 while working part time as an ethicist at the University of British Columbia's Centre for Applied Ethics, where ordinary people walked in and asked to see a philosopher for advice on personal problems. In 1994, he coorganized the first international conference on philosophical counseling in Vancouver. Later, labeling himself as "your friendly neighbourhood philosopher," he began hosting Philosophers Forum at Manhattan bookstores, at which people are invited to "Drop in and philosophize."

He charges clients $100 per session, about the going rate for psychologists. However, Marinoff says philosophical counseling is not an endless affair; he rarely engages clients for more than a handful of sessions.

He and his couch philosophers have many detractors. "It's grandiose of these people to think they can translate emotional problems into Socratic discourse," opined Dorothy Cantor, former president of the American Psychological Association. "I think the marketplace in academia is very tight these days, so this group has recast themselves as therapists, something they were never trained to be." She added that they suffer from the "naive assumption" that intellectual discourse can address often debilitating emotional problems, charging they're not equipped to handle "something as delicate as a person's mental health," and they "totally ignore the role of the unconscious." Other critics have said the mere choice of a philosophical therapist is "denial" of dealing with emotional "issues" and a "flight from feeling," that "people who want to talk to philosophers are misguided," or "fools."

At the risk of sounding like a fool, a rube, a mark, I asked Marinoff in a telephone interview for his take on the controversy.

It's easier for the media, he replied, "to sell controversy than good sense. They portray philosophical counselors as antagonists or competitors. It's very easy to good leading psychiatrists and psychologists into making very insensitive remarks about us. They say we're not trained to deal with suicidal people or psychopaths. Well, the point is, We don't.

"I don't know how to diagnose psychiatric problems, because I'm not a trained physician, I am trained to recognize philosophical problems. If someone comes to me and says 'God is telling me to go out and murder children,' or 'I think there's no hope in life and nothing can stop me killing myself' – people in such extremes are outside the scope of my practice, and I refer them immediately.

"We're not pseudo-physicians, if I may say, as many psychologists are – they've started asking for prescription privileges like doctors. Therapy not only means some kind of medical intervention, it also means prevention of problems and attending to them. In ancient Greece, Therapy was simply an attendant, if we go back to the original etymology. If you look at the wonderfully rich Greek word 'psyche,' it can mean the soul, the character, the mind, even the breath."

One thing is clear: Marinoff's a smooth talker, his authoritative voice speaking in clear sentences, no uhs and ums. I confess I distrust smooth talkers. Maybe it's because I stutter. At any rate, this guy is good, real good.

Still, what about the claim by psychiatrists and therapists that philosophers aren't qualified to tell the difference between someone who is "sick" and someone who merely has routine problems?

Marinoff laughs. "Hey, I ride the subway!" His voice becomes more serious. "Anybody who rides the subway is accustomed to psychopathic behaviour. There are certain signals that you get – probably evolution has bequeathed to us a very long-held set of recognition mechanisms for any kind of aberrance or deviance that we deem to be threatening." He's also read the Standard Diagnostic Manual.

"I do an initial consultation, like any lawyer or social worker or physician. I get a case history from the person: Are you taking any medication? Are there any medical conditions I should be aware of? What is your immediate history? I'm probably the first philosopher in the U.S. to have been given institutional approval [by City College] to do philosophical counseling as part of my research program, and I have a very stringent protocol under federal guidelines. I take careful notes and make a written recommendation on whether this is a good candidate or not for philosophical counseling. I show those notes to a psychiatrist they might put you on Prozac or some other drug. This still won't solve your problem. My point is simply this: what any health-care professional should be offering is appropriate care."

One client – he never uses the word "patient" – came to him after discovering that his wife was having an affair. He wanted to save the marriage. Who should he turn to? Marinoff quickly referred him to Immanuel Kant, who waxes eloquent on the principles behind forgiveness and compassion. Dealing with a death in the family? The dark Dane Soren Kierkegaard might be your man.

Other problems are less earth-shattering, but still pressing. "If you came to me with your broken arm in a cast and said, 'I can't do what I want to do for six months,' now we could do philosophical counseling. If your injury means you can't write or ski and you're down about it, this is not a psychiatric depression that's going to be helped by an extensive analysis of your childhood. The real problem is that meaningful things in your life are now being temporarily removed from you. Philosophical counselors maintain that you have a great deal of latitude and scope in your mind with which to adopt a position that would be helpful to you."

But what if your brain is out of whack, I ask, for want of better terminology?

"People who have chemical imbalances in their brains can be helped by today's extremely sophisticated drugs, which interfere with the uptake of neurochemical transmitters and so forth. This is a big step from the Valium and designer drugs of the '70s that were basically muscle-relaxants. If you're having a biological problem that's preventing you from living a relatively normal life, then obviously you need medical attention, and maybe a drug is the best thing.

"Today, when people talk about chemical imbalances in the brain, they don't know what they're talking about. It's a little mantra they keep repeating. What chemicals, what balance? How do we know when there's a balance or imbalance? Ask that question of psychiatrists and you get an admission that the only thing they're interested in is for their patients to be functional. This has nothing to do with a quantitative analysis of brain chemistry. If, however, you're taking a drug and have become stabilized, you may still have questions: What is there in my life that is meaningful and purposeful, what's the right or wrong thing to do?

"So why can't people get the best of all worlds, when and if they need them? Psychiatrists to get drugs to stabilize themselves, psychologists if they need a lot of work on their emotions, or a philosopher when they're eventually ready to tackle the deeper questions."

Often enough, he says, they can be answered by, say, the book of Ecclesiastes or the likes of Camus, Kant, Socrates, Lao Tzu, Jung, Descartes, Nietzsche and other big cheeses. Distilling their pearls of wisdom for the likes of "Larry" and "Veronica" – and other clients whose cases make up the core of Plato Not Prozac – was no piece of cake for Marinoff. His publisher, Harper Collins, told him that his first draft "wasn't accessible enough," so he worked with an editor in shaping the final product. The book even contains a Hit Parade of Philosophers. For example:

"Albert Camus. Theme: Existentialism. Refrain: Do the right thing even if the universe is cruel or meaningless. Greatest Hits: The Stranger, The Plague."

The Plague triggers something with in me. I ask him about the plague of dumbing-down complex ideas and feelings and thoughts, in an era so dominated by television and computer screens.

"What we have is a leading technological edge that eradicates attention spans," he says. "It dispossesses people. If you try to lump everyone together in a homogenous culture, you often wind up with no culture – people can't be specific about their origins. Dumbing down is an attempt to reach the biggest possible audience, like the Roman bread and circuses.

"I think people are much brighter and much more interested in being challenged than the mass media gives them credit for. There's a large group of people – who are thoughtful, who read – who are completely alienated by this culture. They have nowhere to go. So when we philosophers go into bookstores once a month with open public forums, it's very popular, and this becomes newsworthy. That there are people sitting around exchanging ideas brings in the TV cameras. It's news – that's how far gone we are."

Hmm, "far gone," that reminds me: What does the friendly neighbourhood philosopher suggest I bone up on to help me battle those proverbial demons?

There's a pause over the phone – I can practically see him pensively stroke his beard – and then he recommends two John Stuart Mill works, On Liberty and Utilitarianism. Geez, you could be talking about the inner secrets of shock-absorbers for all I know (I've never driven an automobile). Mill says: "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." Later Mill adds that pleasure is not the sole measure of good: "Better Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied." Okeydoke: so far, so good.

I look Mill up in the Oxford Companion to Philosophy, a 1,009-page tome with tiny print that I picked up months before Marinoff just for my own – uh – utility? It's printed on acid-free paper, which means it will last a lifetime, at least mine (which is not saying much – newsprint might do the trick).

"The leading element in Mill's thought is his lifelong effort to weave together the insights of enlightenment and romanticism." Now, that's mure like it. "He subscribed unswervingly to what he called the 'school of experience and association.'" Ah yes, the school of hard knocks. I remember it well. As I chew on this stuff, I'm starting to feel good, better than James Brown.

"The mind is a terrible thing to lose," said Dan Quayle. "Why ask why?" asks the Budweiser slogan. Why do I still keep pens that have run out of ink in a pot on my desk? Something to contemplate. Half the fun – most? all? – is getting there.

I return to Marinoff's book, which has become reasonably user-friendly for me now. But one more thing, Lou: I'm hopelessly infatuated with a twenty-something philosophy student (true story). Middle-age-crazy, right? Got any bright ideas, doc?

♦ *Plato Not Prozac! Applying Philosophy to Everyday Problems, by Lou Marinoff. Harper Collins, $35. (It will be out in paperback this summer.) Marinoff will speak at 7 p.m. on Thursday at Loyer Cegep College, 4999 Royal Ave., Montreal. Admission, $15 ($10 for students and seniors). For ticket information call (514) 482-9119.*

Book's Hit Parade of Philosophers includes: "Albert Camus. Theme: Existentialism. Greatest Hits: The Stranger, The Plague."

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Lou Marinoff grew up in Côte St. Luc and went to Lower Canada College, where he will give a lecture Thursday evening.

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How to reach us

Lucinda Chodan
Assistant Managing Editor, Features
E-mail: lchodan@thegazette.southam.ca

Michael Shenker
Deputy Features Editor
E-mail: mshenker@thegazette.southam.ca

Editorial inquiries
(514) 987-2560
Fax: (514) 987-2638

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